

HOME ESSAYS

# **Dostoyevsky Misprisoned: “The House of the Dead” and American Prison Literature**

December 23, 2019 • By Ilya Vinitzky





*If prison reformers like  
myself know anything  
about Dostoevsky, it is his  
supposed authorship of a  
sentence consisting of fourteen words.*

*— James E. Robertson, editor-in-chief emeritus,  
Criminal Law Bulletin, from an email to the  
author*

*Prison is hell for the majority, but salvation for*

*the few.*

— *Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The  
Birth of the Prison (1975; trans. by Ivan  
Narodny, 1995) ⊕*

✕

## **1.**

OUR AGE OF all-pervasive fake news is also an age of compulsive fact-checking, made possible by the expanding resources of the internet. And this new wealth of information allows us not only to determine which fact or quotation is wrong or misleading, but also — perhaps more interestingly — to reconstruct the cultural and historical origins of concealed falsehoods and myths, to consider misleading information as a cultural phenomenon that speaks volumes about its time and about the biases and aspirations of those involved, wittingly and unwittingly, in the mystification.

I have recently become intrigued by a quotation

that has been attributed to Dostoyevsky for decades. Until the late 1990s, it was known only in English, and consisted of 14 words: “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” It has been quoted, very often as an epigraph or a closing remark, by numerous American and British activists, lawyers, senators, judges (including Justice Anthony Kennedy), writers, journalists (from *The New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Guardian*), and scholars (but, tellingly, not by Dostoyevsky experts). Writing in *The Globe and Mail* in 2017, Patrick White wryly observed that one can hear this Dostoyevsky quote “at correctional conferences with nauseating regularity”: “It’s ubiquitous because it’s good.” Indeed, it’s even good enough for Hollywood, appearing on the silver screen as the opening quote in the trailer for *Con Air* (1997).

The Library of Congress dictionary of quotations *Respectfully Quoted* comments on its origins: “Attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky. Unverified.” Other American dictionaries of quotations and Wikiquote indicate that its source is Dostoyevsky’s semi-autobiographical prison

novel *The House of the Dead* (1862). Some American publications even refer to page 76 of the 1957 Grove edition of Constance Garnett's translation.

Yet this is all untrue, because (a) there is no such quote in Dostoyevsky's original text (or in any other work written by him) and (b) there is no such quote in Garnett's translation (page 76 of the 1957 edition describes the kindly soul called Nastasya Ivanovna: "Some people maintain (I have heard it and read it) that the purest love for one's neighbour is at the same time the greatest egoism. What egoism there could be in this case, I can't understand.")

acquaintance while we were in prison. She seemed to devote her life to the relief of convicts, but was especially active in helping us. Whether it was that she had had some similar trouble in her family, or that someone particularly near and dear to her had suffered for a similar\* offence, anyway she seemed to consider it a particular happiness to do all that she could for us. She could not do much, of course; she was poor. But we in prison felt that out there, beyond the prison walls, we had a devoted friend. She often sent us news, of which we were in great need. When I left prison and was on my way to another town, I went to see her and made her acquaintance. She lived on the outskirts of the town in the house of a near relation. She was neither old nor young, neither good-looking nor plain; it was impossible to tell even whether she were intelligent or educated. All that one could see in her was an infinite kindness, an irresistible desire to please one, to comfort one, to do something nice for one. All that could be read in her kind gentle eyes. Together with a comrade who had been in prison with me I spent almost a whole evening in her company. She was eager to anticipate our wishes, laughed when we laughed, was in haste to agree with anything we said and was all anxiety to regale us with all she had to offer. Tea was served with savouries and sweetmeats, and it seemed that if she had had thousands she would have been delighted, simply because she could do more for us and for our comrades in prison. When we said good-bye she brought out a cigarette-case as a keepsake for each of us. She had made these cigarette-cases of cardboard for us (and how they were put together!) and had covered them with coloured paper such as is used for covering arithmetic books for children in schools (and possibly some such school book had been sacrificed for the covering). Both the cigarette-cases were adorned with an edging of gilt paper, which she had bought, perhaps, expressly for them. "I see you smoke cigarettes, so perhaps it may be of use to you," she said, as it were apologising timidly for her present. . . . Some people maintain (I have heard it and read it) that the purest love for one's neighbour is at the same time the greatest egoism. What egoism there could be in this case, I can't understand.

Though I had not much money when I came into prison, I could not be seriously vexed with those of the convicts who, in my very first hours in prison, after deceiving me once, came a second, a third, and even a fifth time to borrow from me. But

\*i.e. political.—Translator's Note.

Moreover, Dostoyevsky could not possibly have uttered these words since they had nothing to do with his actual (and, to be sure, paradoxical) views of prison as expressed in the novel. Dostoyevsky, who had spent four years in chains, from 1849 to 1854, at a prison camp (katorga) in Siberia, was immensely interested in Western penal theories and literature on punishment and the prison experience; as a matter of fact, in 1861, the journal co-edited by

Dostoyevsky and his brother published a Russian translation of Giacomo Casanova's prison memoirs, *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise qu'on appelle les Plombs*. He should have been familiar, as Anna Schur suggests in *Wages of Evil: Dostoevsky and Punishment* (2012), with the Western idea that punishment is a product of a nation's degree of "civilization" — a view that had been known to educated Russians since Catherine the Great's enlightened "Instruction" (1767) and was "frequently aired on the pages of Russian periodicals" in the age of the great legal reforms of Alexander II.

However, the writer's religious views of punishment and prisons strikingly differ from the secular ideas of Cesare Beccaria, the founding father of Western penology, Catherine, or 19th-century Russian philanthropists and legal scholars. Although *The House of the Dead* does portray the corruption, fundamental injustice, and total ineffectiveness of the Russian penitentiary system, it does not question, Schur notes, "the need for the existence of punishment" and never calls for prison reform

per se. The novel's protagonist, the disgraced nobleman and wife-murderer Goryanchikov, perceives the horrifying institution as a test of his own spirit, rather than as a test of civilization (a foreign word that had negative connotations for Dostoyevsky). Dostoyevsky's focus is on the painful resurrection of the fallen man, both as an individual soul and as the embodiment of Russia's folk spirit, not on the improvement of physical conditions.

Unsurprisingly, Dostoyevsky portrays prison as "a dead thing." It is what it is: hell — more precisely, "the hell of suffering to spiritual salvation," as Robert Louis Jackson puts it in *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes* (1981). The prison in and of itself does not attract hatred; instead, it forces Goryanchikov to judge his past, reevaluate his secular beliefs, and eventually bless the fate that enabled his Christian revival. "And who was to blame, whose fault was it?" asks the protagonist about the tragic lot of the multitude of gifted, strong people buried within the walls of the prison. "That's just it, who was to blame?" Aptly, an unknown reader of my copy of the 1957 Grove



edition left two angry question marks in the margins next to this rhetorical question.

It's clear, then, that the quote that graced the screen in *Con Air* is a con, fundamentally alien to Dostoyevsky's beliefs. It is a curious product of cultural misreading, or, in Harold Bloom's terminology, "creative misprision" and myth-making. In what follows, I will try to reconstruct the history of this misprision. I must warn the reader in advance that this essay, to paraphrase famous words traditionally (and wrongly) attributed to Emperor Joseph II, has an awful lot of quotes. But rest assured: they are all real and documented.

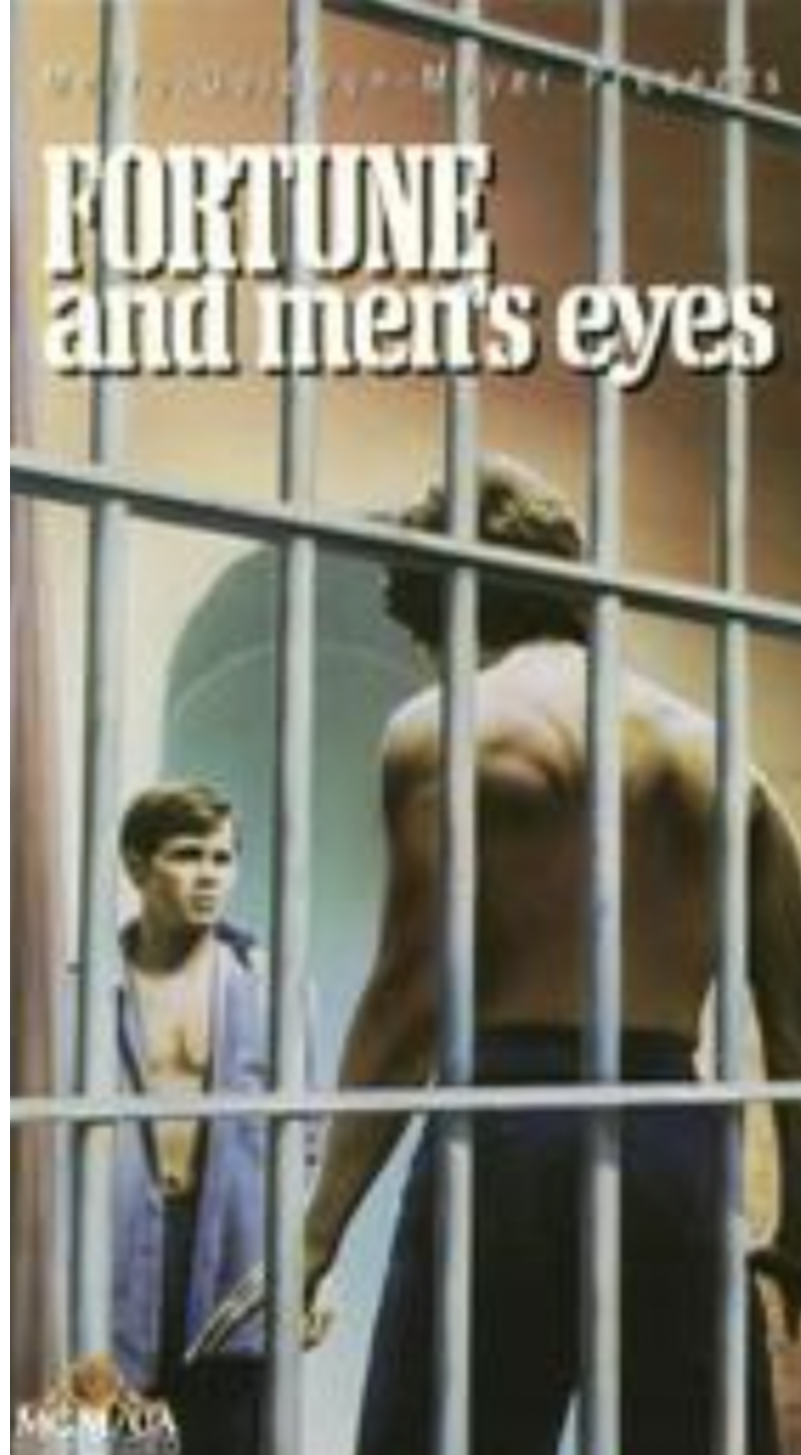
## **2.**

As I discovered, the English quotation has been in circulation since the late 1960s and evolved, in the late 20th century, into a longer, less commonly used, version: "A society should be judged not by the way it treats its outstanding citizens, but by the way it treats its criminals." The initial version shows up not only in newspaper articles, public speeches, and court

hearings, but also on activists' shirts and posters and the drawings of inmates. What, then, was its source?

In 1964, the Canadian playwright and ex-inmate John Herbert wrote a sensational prison play that bore the Shakespearean title *Fortune and Men's Eyes* and focused on a first-time convict's entry into "an isolated, desperate, all-male society in which homosexual acts are the institutionalized basis of the political and social structure." In interviews, Herbert constantly cited Dostoyevsky's words about prisons and civilization as a kind of epigraph to his play, without any reference to their actual source. [1]

First presented in New York City by the Broadway impresario David Rothenberg in 1967, Herbert's play has subsequently been produced more than 400 times in over 100 countries, including a 1969 show directed by James Baldwin in Istanbul. In 1971, a film based on the play was released.



The play even lent its name to the influential prisoners' rights group Fortune Society, led by Rothenberg (the group is still active in New York). As Rothenberg stated in October 1968, Dostoyevsky's words became the slogan of the Society, whose goal was "to create a greater public awareness of the prison system in

America today” and “to reveal complexities and problems faced by inmates during their incarceration.” Since its founding in 1969, the Society has been broadcasting its weekly radio program *Both Sides of the Bars* and publishing the monthly newsletter *The Fortune News* with the words attributed to Dostoyevsky’s *The House of the Dead* as its motto, which always appears on the front page in the upper right corner:

From THE FORTUNE SOCIETY  
1545 Broadway, New York, N. Y. 10036 Suite 612 265-5644

"The degree of civilization in a society  
can be judged by entering its prisons."  
Dostoevski -- The House of the Dead

# FORTUNE NEWS

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June 1969



THE FORTUNE SOCIETY'S WEEKLY RADIO program, BOTH SIDES OF THE BARS, RETURNS ON THE AIR ON SUNDAY EVES at 7:30 PM and Monday mornings (repeats) at 11 AM. Here Fortune Society members Mel Rivers (center) and Alvin Frank (right) talk with moderator David Rothenberg.

## IRRELEVANT CRIES

"Longer prison sentences" is a political cry we often hear these days. No-one probes this vocalizing and we legislate lives as a result of political chiches.

Of course the answer is not LONGER prison sentences -- nor is it necessarily shorter prison sentences or even keeping them at the same length.

The logical and infrequently discussed aspect of this question -- is what we do with the man in the time we have him imprisoned. Political leaders should be crying for relevant sentencing of convicted criminals which deals with the man.

Any ex-convict will tell the political leaders -- should the office seekers ask them -- that the knowledge of crime is greater after a prison sentence and that the seeking of revenge is intensified.

If we utilized a man's time in a positive manner in prison -- and made his time meaningful, we could do in less time what some are calling for in more time.

We must change attitudes and behavior patterns of anti-social humans and supplement this with vocational and educational programs as part of a total rehabilitative program.

When we deal with human lives, our cries must be relevant. That makes for less crime as well as good politics.

1. The Fortune Society has as its basic purpose to create a greater public awareness of the Prison system in America today. We also hope to help the public realize the problems and complexities confronted by the inmates -- during their incarceration and when they rejoin society.

2. The Fortune Society does this by sending out teams of speakers (ex-convicts) to talk to school groups, church and civic groups and on radio and television. We want to relate first-hand experience of prison life and to help to create a greater understanding of the causes of crime in America.

Anyone can be on our mailing list and participate in the Fortune Society program. WE HAVE ASKED THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD IT TO CONTRIBUTE \$2/, \$5/, \$10/, \$25, or more, to help us with the cost of mailing, stationery and transportation when the men speak. Checks can be made out to the FORTUNE SOCIETY.

NAMES ON MAILING LIST

PAYING SPONSORS

37	Nov. 1967	8
850	June 1968	201
4750	May 1969	1362
5015	June 1969	1480

In the spring of 1969, *The Village Voice* reported that Rothenberg has used his publicity talents on

behalf of ex-convicts, sharing his office with them and accompanying them “on speaking engagements.” Elaborating on Dostoyevsky’s quote, the newspaper concluded that “the crusade for decent and effective prisons is an uphill battle but one well worth engaging in if we are ever to approximate our boast of being civilized.”

Dostoyevsky’s supposed dictum, very much in keeping with the 1960s and ’70s Western progressive agenda epitomized by Foucault’s *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, was adopted by American activists as the motto for the prison reform movement.

### **3.**

My hypothesis is that we are dealing with a mystification, perhaps unintended, that originated in Herbert’s circle. Herbert may have thought (wrongly) that this statement summarized the Russian writer’s views of the subject, as expressed in his prison novel. It is possible that the Canadian playwright simply invoked, and attributed by association, a

common idea that had circulated in various versions and in different languages for more than a century. One can find similar declarations, without references to the Russian writer, in sources ranging from Barthélemy Maurice's 1840 *Histoire politique et anecdotique des prisons de la Seine* ("Voulez-vous apprécier le degré de moralité auquel un peuple est parvenu, mesurer, pour ainsi dire, sa civilisation? voyez comment ce peuple traite ses prisonniers"), to Kenneth Ruck's introduction to the 1929 Everyman edition of John Howard's 1777 *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* ("the condition of its prisons and its prisoners is no bad indication of the development of any society and its degree of civilization"), to Judge Walter V. Schaefer's 1957 Oliver Wendell Holmes Lecture ("The quality of a nation's civilization can be largely measured by the methods it uses in the enforcement of its criminal law"), to a 1958 essay by the prominent French lawyer and historian *Maurice Garçon* ("On peut dire que, dans une certaine mesure, on apprécie la moralité et le degré de civilisation d'un peuple à la manière dont il traite ses prisonniers").

Historically, the sentiment under investigation originates in Montesquieu's teaching of the degrees of civilization in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), which inspired Beccaria to write, in *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), "If there were an exact and universal scale of crimes and punishments, we should have an approximate and common measure of the gradations of tyranny and liberty, and of the basic humanity and evil of the different nations." Beccaria's words had a deep influence on 19th-century penal reform movements, including Russian ones, and by the mid-20th century had become a kind of "fatherless" absolute statement widely used in legal documents and manuals. For example, it opens the 1963 *Minimum Jail Standards: Recommended Standards for Administration, Construction, Programs* of the Californian prison system: "The treatment of crime and criminals may some day be used by historians as one measure of the degree of civilization achieved by nations."

By the time Herbert and the Fortune Society canonized and disseminated the quotation on

prisons and civilization as belonging to Dostoyevsky, there was already an established tradition of using the Russian writer's real words on the ineffectiveness of solitary confinement in American literature about prisons; for instance, Howard B. Gill's article "Correctional Philosophy and Architecture" (1963), from *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, bears a famous Dostoyevskian epigraph: "It is acknowledged that neither convict prisons, nor the hulks, nor any system of hard labour ever cured a criminal." Tellingly, in 1960s publications, these words were often seconded by Winston Churchill's dictum, dated 1910: "The mood and temper of the public with regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country." [2] One can speculate that in this context our quotation was the random result of ascribing Dostoyevsky's name and aura to a popular old statement, associated with Churchill's actual words.

#### 4.

But why Dostoyevsky? To be sure, plenty other



candidates for the dictum's authorship were named in various Western sources: Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, Churchill, and Nelson Mandela. [3] In the Italian tradition, it has regularly been attributed to Voltaire ("Non fatemi vedere i vostri palazzi ma le vostre carceri, poiché è da esse che si misura il grado di civiltà di una Nazione"), and in the French tradition, to Albert Camus ("Nous ne pouvons juger du degré de civilisation d'une nation qu'en visitant ses prisons"). However, in the end, all these candidates have been passed over in favor of the Russian writer.

In *The Making of a Counter-culture Icon: Henry Miller's Dostoevsky* (2007), Maria Bloshteyn asserts that *The House of the Dead* was the first of his works to capture the imagination of American readers. With this novel, Dostoyevsky "entered the American consciousness" as an autobiographical writer to be revered for "the authenticity of his observations." Marketed by early publishers with the title *Buried Alive: Or, Ten Years of Penal Servitude in Siberia* (1881), the novel was perceived by late 19th- and early 20th-century

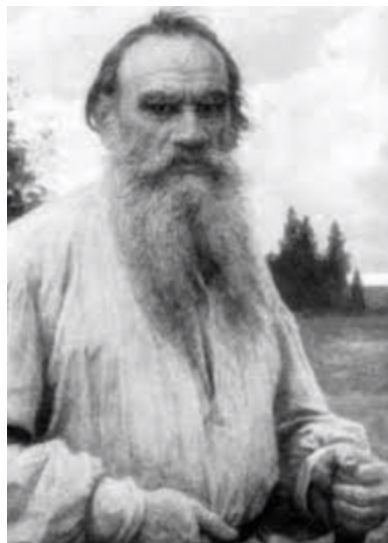
readers as a severe critique of Russia's  
oppressive regime.

In the late 1950s and '60s, Dostoyevsky's prison  
novel gained new momentum in the American  
and British public imaginations, as evidenced by  
the editions of 1957, 1959, 1962 and 1965,  
published with Ernest J. Simmons's and H.  
Sutherland Edwards's introductions detailing  
the author's prison life. The writer Robert Payne  
also dedicated a chapter to Dostoyevsky's ordeal  
in his well-received 1961 biography  
*Dostoyevsky: A Human Portrait*, which  
included the following haunting portrait,  
captioned "Dostoyevsky in prison," attributed to  
the Russian realist artist Klavdii V. Lebedev, and  
likely taken from the only known reproduction  
of the mysterious portrait *Dostoevsky in Exile*,  
which was published in an émigré edition of  
Dostoyevsky's writings in the 1920s:



Suspiciously, the catalog of Lebedev's works contains no portrait of Dostoyevsky. Moreover, the dark-haired man depicted is clearly not Dostoyevsky but, more likely, a random peasant or artisan with a tobacco pouch. In fact, a page earlier, Payne had written that upon arrival at the prison camp, Dostoyevsky had been shaved ("half of his mustache removed, and all his

beard”) and was made to wear gray canvas trousers, a gray coat, and “a kind of sailor cap without brim or visor.” Later on, this alleged “prison portrait” of Dostoyevsky was reproduced in American newspapers and even used for the cover page of some editions of *Crime and Punishment*. Presented as the iconic image of a mysterious Russian author, the portrait bears a closer resemblance to the generic, almost mythological image of pensive, long-bearded, long-suffering Russian writers from Lev Tolstoy to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:



Nevertheless, the rekindled fascination with Dostoyevsky’s prison novel and personal experiences in the 1960s opened up a new way of looking at him in the West. *The House of the Dead* was read not only as a Russian story that

severely criticized the tsarist prison system in exotic Siberia, but rather as a powerful statement against the inhumane treatment of inmates everywhere. For example, in June 1964, *The Globe and Mail* published an article by John Kraglund about Leoš Janáček's opera *From the House of the Dead*. Kraglund observed that "the composer's principal concern" was "to let a number of prisoners tell their own stories and to show the effect of imprisonment which reduced all prisoners to the same physical and spiritual level of negative existence — upon those who differed only in initial character." And south of the Canadian border, interest in the Russian writer and ex-convict was roused by post-Stalinist prison writing, especially the work and public presence of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Tellingly, one 1971 anthology of prison poetry included an anonymous inmate's poem addressed to Solzhenitsyn: "This is why there is no sadness. / I lick your tears, / Your salt writes our names on my tongue, / Our rings of salt mean forever."

In a word, Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* was successfully domesticated by American

audiences. In the social and political imagination of the 1960s and '70s, the novel seemed to propagate a broader, anti-bourgeois, anti-totalitarian vision of human society. And as Bloshteyn points out, Dostoyevsky's work might have had a particularly significant impact upon a number of African-American writers, who praised the Russian's "interest in the psychology of the pariah or outcast" and considered him "a witness" and model writer who helped them to "legitimize" their struggles with literary form. [4]

As James Baldwin observed in 1963, in *Life* magazine, "It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people." To quote Dale Peterson's excellent analysis, Dostoyevsky's novel was comprehended by African-American writers as one of the major "'soul-trying ordeals' that affirm the pain of divided minds being stretched to accommodate the birth of a cultural hybridity, a multiple culturedness that more and more is becoming the measure of our common

humanity.” [5]

Unsurprisingly, the quotation on prisons and civilization allegedly drawn from the powerful work of “a Russian giant” was widely used by African-American human rights activists, as evidenced, for instance, both by its role as an epigraph to the article “The Black Prisoner as Victim,” published by the noted lawyer and civil rights activist William Haywood Burns in *The Black Law Journal* (1971), and in this poster:





Although the first citation of Dostoyevsky's alleged dictum in association with Herbert's play and the Fortune Society group is dated August 3, 1968, the frequency of citation peaked in the years 1971–'72, following fierce public discussion of the bloody Attica prison riot. Consider the following entry for 1971 in Clarence S. Kailin's *The Black Chronicle: An American History Textbook Supplement* (1974):



On September 23, inhuman prison conditions, long suppressed from public notice, led to an uprising by Attica Prison inmates. The uprising was suppressed when Governor Rockefeller sent in one thousand state troopers. Forty-two inmates and guards were killed, apparently by police fire (“Hostages Killed By Bullets, Not Knives. No Guns Held By Inmates,” *Madison Capital Times*, September 24, 1971). “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons” — Dostoevsky.

In this context, the quotation by a Russian writer known for his strong anti-Western sentiments sounds less like a basic legal principle and more like a sarcastic exposé of the deceptiveness of white American civilization as a whole. [6]

## 5.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that David Rothenberg, his Fortune Society, and many other activists of the age considered the author of *The House of the Dead* to be a father

figure for their own social and literary experiments. Starting in the early issues of *The Fortune News*, members of the group published and advertised literary works written by convicts and ex-convicts. US newspapers observed “the growth of prison publications” and spoke of “prison authors” as a contemporary phenomenon influenced, in part, by Dostoyevsky’s novel:

During the last year, *The News* had published the writings of several convict-authors, providing, we had hoped, an insight into the minds of the prisoners and of their environment behind the wall [...] Prison authors, whether their writing has been smuggled outside the wall or passed by the censor, have to be credited with revealing some of the violent conditions existing in prisons. In *The House of the Dead* Feodor Dostoevski wrote, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Society now is being judged by the prison authors. [7]

According to an article by John Hamer from

1972, one of the most prolific American “convict-authors” who (to paraphrase another famous dictum, falsely attributed to the writer) came out of Dostoyevsky’s prison clothes and “discovered a vast readership outside the prison walls” was Frank Bisignano. [8] Bisignano killed an off-duty police officer in Newark in 1961 and became the first man on death row in New Jersey’s history to gain his freedom by parole. [9] The reformers represented Bisignano as a man who had “entered prison as a high school dropout with an 8th grade education,” “completed his G.E.D. in 1963,” “slowly and quietly triumphed over” his “demons,” published several articles in *The Village Voice*, including a partly fictionalized account of prison life titled “The World as Seen Through a Not Quite Dead Man’s Eye,” and was eventually hired as a public relations employee at Trenton State College. “We are a special breed,” Bisignano declared to Hamer, “special in that we possess more raw material, more pen power, more nitty-gritty than any two writers on the street; but, as writers in prison, we stand less chance of making it, of marketing our work, than any hack in the free world.” To be sure, the degree of success of the

reformers' educational experiment in this particular case can be judged by the titles of the repentant sinner's novels, published under the penname Warren Bisig before or immediately after his release in 1973: *My Sexy Mom and I*; *The Sweet Taste of Daddy*; *Mother Takes a Sin Trip*; *The New Prison Nurse*; *Willing Virgin*; *The Garment Industry Girls*; *Deeper Throat*; *Open Legs*; and *The Child of Gomorrah*. A random, and possibly the most innocent, quote from this offspring of Dostoyevsky runs:

“Orgasm! she thought, feeling it begin. Nothing else mattered — not Uncle John, not tomorrow, not anything. Nothing except reaching the place where pussies and pricks and assholes and mouths united” (*Diane's Lessons in Bondage*).



Bisignano's pseudonym "*Warren Bisig*" clearly indicates the collaborative nature of his writings. He was discovered by a Californian literary agent, named James A. Warren, who had "sent out some 465 letters to prisons all over the country appealing for manuscripts." Hamer reported that Warren received more than 2,500 responses and about 200 actual manuscripts, including several he called "sure-fire winners" and many others he considered "promising." When Warren contacted him, Bisignano had only 95 cents in his prison account. Luckily,

“pornography pays,” and the convict-writer “noted with amusement that between August 1971 and January 1972 he turned out seven sex books and earned more than \$6,000.” [10]

Of course, Dostoyevsky (or, more precisely, his fictional alter ego and murderer-turned-author Goryanchikov) inspired a number of “gifted offenders” with aspirations beyond pornography and profit. One of them, portrayed in a 1969 article in *The Village Voice*, compared his fate with Raskolnikov’s “death of jail” and spiritual rebirth: “Prison was a turning point for me. I took a vow there that I would never take things for granted.” Another convict, mentioned by the *Voice*, commented on Dostoyevsky’s alleged dictum from *The House of the Dead*: “It’s true. You see what it’s all about. People say, ‘But that’s a jail.’ I say, ‘No, it’s America. It’s what’s underneath.” [11] In fact, the idea of America as the “prison house of the Black nation” was central to the prison literature of 1964–’72, as manifested in the works of its major practitioners, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Etheridge Knight, and Sam Melville (the latter was an ardent reader of

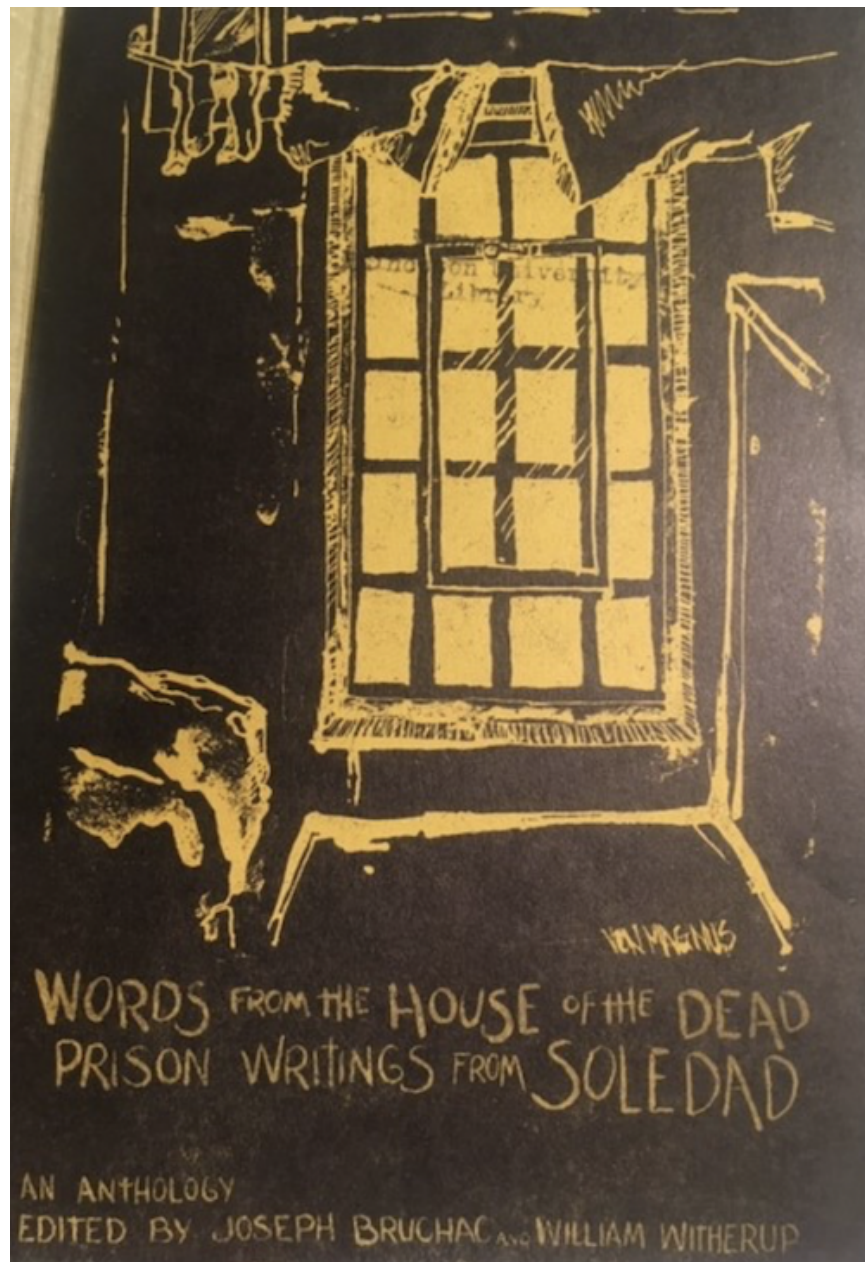
Dostoyevsky). In *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989), Howard Bruce Franklin, distinguished two overlapping groups of prison writers that emerged during this period: “[T]he political activist thrust into prison, and the common criminal thrust into political activism.” Both groups were fascinated with Dostoyevsky’s *The House of the Dead* as searing defense of a prisoner’s human dignity and “the measure of our common humanity.”

The period also witnessed the emergence of a new genre: anthologies of work authored by the convicts of a given correctional institution. As the editor of one such collection, *Words from the House of the Dead: Prison Writings from Soledad Prison* (1971), eloquently explained in his introduction,

Dostoevski wrote a book of his prison experiences and titled it *The House of the Dead*. The title is still appropriate even though the Russian novelist was writing about conditions a century ago and in another culture. The physical environment of prison has changed perhaps for the better

since then, from the dark, damp, stony  
dungeon to the electrically lit, waxed and  
buffed concrete cell with its own sink and  
flush toilet. At least this is the situation on  
the main line in most of the California  
prisons. But this is all a smokescreen. [...]  
The truth is behind the smokescreen. The  
jailer with the whip and knout is still there  
but he has modern psychological weapons.  
Prison is still the house of the dead. Every  
day someone dies spiritually.





Yet some authors disagreed with this radical generalization and tried to “send” Dostoyevsky’s novel and the quotation on prisons and civilization back to Russia in order to vindicate the US penitentiary system. “It is ironic,” wrote criminologist Charles H. Logan in *Private Prisons: Cons and Pros* (1990), “that some critics of private prisons are fond of quoting

Dostoevsky — that the degree of a nation’s civilization can be seen in the way it treats its prisoners — and wondering aloud what Dostoevsky would think of private prisons.” According to Logan, if Dostoyevsky had lived in the Soviet Union, “he would have been witness to one of the most brutal and lawless prison systems in history,” with political prisoners “jammed shoulder to shoulder into airless cells and box-cars and shipped to punitive slave camps where they were worked, starved, and frozen to death.” However, “if he visited contemporary American prisons, including private prisons, Dostoevsky would probably be impressed by the civil and human rights protections, the food and medical care, the standards of decency, even the space, he would generally find there, at least in comparison to the Soviet Gulag.” Overall, the quotation “would indeed say something about our civilization, but nothing that would discourage private sector involvement in the running of prisons.”

Dostoyevsky’s “famous words” on prisons and civilization are still very much alive and frequently used in the Anglophone press in

accounts of the horrors of “houses of the dead.”

They were cited in the May 1, 2019, issue of my “home” newspaper, *The Daily Princetonian*:

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that “the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Enter America’s prisons and it becomes clear that we are nowhere near as just a society as we claim to be. If we want to get closer to the values we idealize, we should rethink whether incarceration is the answer at all.

Most recently, human rights activists have used the quotation as a weapon to critique secret prisons across the globe and the “Trump regime’s unwavering support for incarceration of adult immigrants and their innocent children.”

[12]

## 6.

The irony of history has also seen the Russian writer’s alleged dictum return to Russia. To the best of my knowledge, its first appearance dates back to 1977, when it cropped up in the Russian

translation of Howard Zinn's *Postwar America* (1973), who credited the words to Dostoyevsky. Characteristically, the famously well-trained Soviet translators smelled the rat and deleted the name of the Russian writer from their rendition.

The attribution to Dostoyevsky entered Russian public discourse only in the late 1990s and early 2000s, likely first popularized by the Russian-American film director Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, who used it in interviews and in his 2006 essay "Crimes and Punishments." Another source for the quote's "Russification" appears to be a Russian translation of the English review of oligarch and political dissident Mikhail Khodorkovsky's 2012 prison memoirs:

"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons," wrote Dostoevsky in *The House of the Dead*.

Khodorkovsky's testimony is that this is a corrupt system with little or no effort to do more than coop up the hopeless, the drug-addicted, the vicious — and the occasional visionary. [13]

Although Khodorkovsky never quotes Dostoyevsky's apocryphal words in his book, the ultimate goal of his prison memoir, as formulated in its introduction, seems to be informed by this American statement: "I wrote about the country in which our remarkable people continue to live in penury and without rights. And I wrote about a future Russia that we will be able to feel proud of without a trace of shame — the Russia that will ultimately take the road of European civilization. A road we all share."

Today, Russian politicians, activists, and journalists frequently use Dostoyevsky's alleged words to excoriate the Russian penal system. In turn, the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service adopted it as a kind of ideological décor. This "very fair statement," as Yaroslav Nilov, a deputy of the State Duma, observes, hangs at the entrance of the women's penal colony in Kolosovka in Kaliningrad Province. Another visitor of the colony suggested that "it is possibly due to this slogan that we are at 100% production capacity!"



Russian bloggers — as well, as their American, French, and German counterparts — have been searching for the source of the quotation in Dostoyevsky’s works for almost 10 years, to no avail.

7.

The phenomenon of a “fake Dostoyevsky” is by no means new. The most famous of his apocryphal sayings, paraphrased earlier in this article, is that all Russian authors “came out of Gogol’s ‘Overcoat.’” [14] In 2013, Eric Naiman uncovered a magnificent English hoax dealing with Dostoyevsky’s alleged encounter with Charles Dickens. [15] Yet, as we have seen, the American history of our quotation presents a

very different case. It reveals not only the statement's origin and false attribution, but also the American reception of Dostoyevsky and the differences between his and Western interpretations of prison. Whereas many liberal criminalists and reformers in the United States have tried to gradually improve the nation's penal system and a number of radical activists have condemned prison as an incorrigibly corrupt and oppressive bourgeois institution, Dostoyevsky tended to view it as a horrible "house of the dead" which senselessly destroys "the most gifted, the strongest of our people," yet provides chosen sufferers with a unique chance for miraculous spiritual epiphany and moral renewal.

Indeed, American culture can be tested by its treatment of Dostoyevsky as manifested in the history of our quotation. The aphorism, ideologically rooted in 18th-century Enlightenment thinking and falsely attributed to the author of *The House of the Dead* by American activists of the late 1960s, sums up the essence of US prison reform and protest movements, as well as the message of the era's

prison literature. Sanctified by the name and cultural aura of the great anti-Western writer and former inmate, the quotation lent a universal ethical dimension to a targeted critique of the North American prison-industrial complex.

As Amy Ronner told me in discussing this matter, there is something about Dostoyevsky that makes American criminologists and activists reach out to him for support:

“Sometimes ‘we’ are so desperate to have him as our ally that we even construct (unintentionally?) a myth or falsehood. Why him?” I think that this sincere fascination with and unintended misprision of Dostoyevsky’s “human rights” writings can be explained by a unique American sensitivity to the existential issue of humiliated human dignity, which Dostoyevsky raised and portrayed in his post-prison novels so powerfully but interpreted in a framework very different from enlightened civilizationist ideologies. The real Dostoyevsky, then, is an alien to contemporary prison activists, who have, by force of necessity, converted him into a natural and desirable ally.



P.S.

The quotation used as the second epigraph to this essay obviously does not (and could not) come from the writings of Michel Foucault, either in the original or in translation. However, no one can prevent its active proliferation once it falls on suitable ideological soil.

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✕

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[1] See Dane Lanken, “Playwright John Herbert Stays on the Outside,” *The Montreal Gazette*, November 7, 1970, and Frank Prosnitz, “The Fortune Society Offers Hope,” *Asbury Park Press*, August 3, 1968.

[2] See in “Dread, harsh orders not now heard in jails,” *The Leader-Post*, July 23, 1956. These words were rendered in Churchill’s 1951 book *Closing the Ring* as “[n]othing can be more abhorrent to democracy than to imprison a person or keep him in prison because he is unpopular. This is really the test of civilization.”

[3] Mandela expanded upon the quotation in his memoirs: “A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones —

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Russia (Northwestern University Press, 2015), *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (Toronto University Press, 2009; Choice Magazine's list of Outstanding Academic Titles for 2010) and *A Cultural History of Russian Literature*, co-written with Andrew Wachtel (Polity Press, 2009). He also co-edited *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2007). His most personal book, *The Court of the Mad: Psychiatry, Ideology, and Russian Culture* (New Literary Observer, 2017; in Russian), is available in the introduction of *Notes from the Russian literary tradition from the 18th through the 20th century*, ed. by Dostoevsky, DuBois, and the Unveiling of Ethnic Soul" *The* *Massachusetts Review* 54, no. 3 (2013); American "revolutionist," arms dealer, journalist, writer, art critic, and promoter.

[5] Dale E. Peterson, "Underground Notes': Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and the African American Confessional Novel" in *Bakhtin and the Nation*, ed. Donald A. Wesling et al. (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000)

**RECOMMENDED**

[6] In *Dostoevsky and the Law* (2015), the legal scholar Amy D. Ronner offers a striking example of American readings of the novel not as a portrayal of Russia's archaic penal system, a "world apart from our own," but rather as an illuminating story of "the unsettling likeness between Dostoevsky's Omsk fortress and our own prisons," a "recreation of Dead House" in the contemporary United States.

[7] “Prison Authors. Our Editorial Opinion,”

## ~~New Castle News~~ January 26, 1972 Barbaric and Excessive: Two Books on Punishment in the United States

Sabrina Ali reviews "The Meaning of Life: The Case  
for Abolishing Life Sentences" and "Insane: America's  
Original Treatment of Mental Illness."  
[8] John Hamer, “Convict Writers Find a  
Public,” *The Record*, January 26, 1972.

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[9] Frank Bisignano, “Literary Future for Cons,”  
All Is Permitted, All Over Again: Oliver  
*Fortune News*, December 1971.  
Ready’s Translation of Fyodor  
Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment”

[10] Carl Zeitz, “He’s Starting Over After 11 Years  
on Death Row,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April  
30, 1973.

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[11] ~~Karl’s Law or Dante’s Inferno?~~ “After the Death of Jail,

Rebirth Like Raskolnikov,” *The Village Voice*,  
July 10, 1969.  
with the most pessimistic and conclusory line in his  
book: “Here optimists really are fools.”...

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[12] *The Shinborn Star*, July 5, 2019.

## Dostoevsky, Inequality, and Tsarnaev’s Humanity

[13] *Financial Times*, April 11, 2014; see the  
Pressure cookers....  
Russian text [here](#).

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[14] The French and Russian origins of these  
words were first traced by S. A. Reiser and, most  
recently and convincingly, by Aleksandr Dolinin  
in “Kto zhe skazal ‘Vse my vyshli iz ‘Shineli’

Gogolia?” *Russkaia literatura*, no. 3 (2018).

[15] Eric Naiman, “When Dickens Met Dostoevsky,” *Times Literary Supplement*, April 10, 2013.

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